

# Proposed California Foothills Legacy Area

## *Questions and Answers*



USFWS

We've heard a number of questions from ranchers and the general public over the last several months regarding the proposed California Foothills Legacy Area. Below are answers to several of these questions. Answers to other questions will be addressed in the draft plan which is scheduled for release in late spring/early summer of this year.

### **What is the status of the planning process?**

The initial public scoping period for the proposed CA Foothills Legacy Area has been completed. A summary of the comments is available at: <http://fws.gov/cno/refuges/planning/CFLA.cfm>. The next steps involve developing and analyzing alternatives for the proposed new rangeland easement program. A draft plan should be ready for review and comment by late spring/early summer of 2012.

### **Will there be other opportunities for public input?**

Yes. We hope to have a draft plan available for public review and comment in late spring. At that time, we plan to host a series of workshops where you can find out more about the plan and ask us questions. In the meantime, we have started to meet with a few local cattlemen's groups and are happy to meet with other interested groups (cattlemen's, farm bureau, RCDs, etc). Your input and questions are always welcomed throughout the planning process. For more information, please contact Mark Pelz at 916/414-6504 or [fw8plancomments@fws.gov](mailto:fw8plancomments@fws.gov).

### **What kinds of restrictions will be included in the easements if the program is approved?**

We anticipate the easements would be "minimally restrictive" – meaning that very few rights are bought from a property owner. The easements would be perpetual and would limit the type and amount of development that may take place on a property in the future, but would encourage continued agricultural uses such as livestock grazing. We are currently reviewing a variety of rangeland easements from other organizations and will be using those models to develop a proposed template easement that will be available for public review.

### **Would third parties be allowed to hold FWS-funded easements?**

Several organizations and individuals have asked if the FWS can grant funds to third parties such as land trusts for easements. While this may be done with other funding granted through the FWS (e.g. habitat conservation plan and recovery land acquisition grants), this particular program is different and would be funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund. Congress mandates that only FWS can hold easements funded by these sources. However, we are exploring options to work with 3<sup>rd</sup> parties such as land trusts to do outreach and monitoring for the program.

### **Is this just a massive government plan to take control of millions of acres of private rangeland?**

The FWS would not manage/control the land. In fact, our interest in funding this effort is to bring resources to the private landowners who are already providing good stewardship of the land so that they can keep doing what they've been doing. This easement program would simply buy limited rights from willing sellers to ensure the lands are kept as rangeland and not converted to other uses. These are the same rights that other organizations such as land trusts and NRCS have been purchasing with their easement programs. Regarding the scale of the proposed easement program, we recognize this will be a long term effort. For example, our wetland easement program in the Central Valley has been ongoing for 32 years, during which we've acquired 333 easements (116,000 acres). Though we cannot predict land values and future funding levels, we expect a rangeland easement program to be available for decades for voluntary participants.

### **Why does the FWS have to designate focal areas?**

We've heard several requests that the FWS not designate focal areas and make private rangelands statewide eligible for the proposed easement program. There are a number of reasons why we focus these types of projects. Our national planning policy requires that we identify discrete boundaries for projects such as the CFLA in order to focus our limited funding on

areas that have the highest value for wildlife. We also believe that designating focal areas helps fulfill our responsibility to be open and honest to the public about where we propose to acquire easements. In addition, it helps us conduct a more accurate analysis of the regional economic impacts of the proposed program. That said, we understand the sensitivity of identifying areas that are too specific and we are exploring different alternatives that achieve a better balance between these objectives.

**How would lands within a designated FWS focal area be affected?**

We’ve heard concerns from a number of ranchers speculating that lands within designated focal areas could be adversely affected through increased regulation, reduced property values, and/or reduced availability of other rangeland easement programs. This has not been the case in the 30+ year history of our existing easement program in the Central Valley. We would not pursue a rangeland easement program if it had consequences such as these. In our view, anything that threatens the viability of ranching operations is a threat to the wildlife values these ranches provide. The whole purpose of the proposed easement program is to protect these wildlife values by providing another tool for ranchers interested in preserving their lands.

**Would lands within an identified focal area, whether within the easement program or not, be subject to increased scrutiny under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)?**

These focal areas are only being used to help identify areas where Federal funding could aid in keeping working ranches

intact to the benefit of native wildlife. Similar to the existing Central Valley easement programs, there would be no changes in ESA implementation associated with this easement program.

**How would the proposed easement programs affect county tax revenues?**

We realize that county revenues have declined substantially over the last several years and are committed to minimizing any adverse effects of the proposed program on tax revenues. We are limiting the program to easements only (instead of also including the option for fee title acquisitions) so lands both stay in the hands of the ranchers who have managed them and remain on county tax rolls. The draft plan will include an analysis, conducted by an economist, of the effects of the proposed program on the regional economy and the affected counties and public will have a chance to review and comment on the analysis.



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